

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AQIDAH IN THE TIKTOK GENERATION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

¹Rashidah Md Hasan, ²Ramlan Mustapha

¹Kolej matrikulasi Pulau Pinang & ²Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang, Malaysia

¹rashidah220322@gmail.com & mujahidpahang@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author: Rashidah Md Hasan (rashidah220322@gmail.com)

Received 24 Feb 2026; Revised 14 april 2026; Accepted 20 May 2026; Published 1 June 2026

Vol: 4, Issue 2 (2026)

Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.20371509

Abstract

Keyword:

Aqidah education, TikTok generation, Islamic pedagogy, digital literacy, religious authority, algorithmic culture, short-form video

This conceptual paper examines the multifaceted challenges confronting educators tasked with teaching Aqidah (Islamic creed) to a generation deeply immersed in TikTok and similar short-form video platforms. Drawing upon Media Ecology Theory, Cognitive Load Theory, and constructivist learning paradigms, the paper identifies and analyses eight critical pedagogical challenges: (1) attention fragmentation and the erosion of contemplative learning; (2) algorithmic exposure to deviant theological content and pseudo-religious authorities; (3) the displacement of textual scholarly authority (ulama) by visual influencer culture; (4) parasocial relationships with online religious content creators; (5) echo-chamber effects on theological worldview formation; (6) identity instability complicating aqidah internalisation; (7) the dominance of visual-experiential epistemology over rational-textual proof (dalil 'aqli wa naqli); and (8) the crisis of teacher authority in physical classroom settings. The paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework that synthesises digital literacy, contemplative pedagogy, and traditional uşul al-dīn methodology to address these challenges. Implications for Islamic Studies curriculum design, teacher professional development, and institutional policy at higher education institutions in Malaysia and the broader Muslim world are discussed.



This is an open-access article under the CC BY-SA license.

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.20371509

Introduction

Aqidah, the systematic articulation of Islamic creed, has historically constituted the epistemic foundation of Muslim consciousness, character, and conduct. Within the classical Islamic educational tradition, Aqidah occupied a privileged position because it shapes how a Muslim perceives reality, ethics, and ultimate purpose (Al-Attas, 1980; Halstead, 2004). Pedagogically, the transmission of Aqidah relied upon a triadic structure text, teacher, and contemplative time wherein the learner internalised tawhīd, the attributes of God, prophecy, and eschatology through guided

study, scholarly authority, and sustained reflection (Boyle, 2006; Mohamed, 2022).

The contemporary classroom, however, no longer exists in cognitive isolation from the digital environment that shapes young Muslims outside its walls. The generation now occupying secondary and tertiary classrooms variously termed Generation Z and Generation Alpha has come of age inside an attention economy dominated by short-form video platforms, of which TikTok is currently the most influential globally and within Malaysia (Anderson & Jiang, 2022; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). TikTok's defining features algorithmically curated, endless, sub-minute video sequences optimised for affective engagement restructure not only how young people consume content but also how they form beliefs, recognise authority, and construct identity (Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

This restructuring poses unprecedented challenges for Aqidah educators. The contemplative, text-anchored, authority-respecting cognitive habits historically required for mastering creedal subjects are increasingly at odds with the fragmented, visually saturated, and influencer-mediated cognitive habits cultivated by short-form platforms (Carr, 2020; Hassan & Ibrahim, 2024). Empirical reports from Malaysian Islamic Studies lecturers describe shrinking student attention spans, declining capacity for textual engagement, and rising classroom encounters with creedally problematic content first encountered on TikTok (Abdullah et al., 2023; Mustapha & Ismail, 2024). Yet conceptual scholarship that maps these challenges systematically, and proposes coherent pedagogical responses grounded in Islamic educational philosophy, remains scarce.

This paper offers such a conceptual mapping. Rather than presenting empirical findings, it advances a theoretically grounded analysis of the principal challenges confronting Aqidah teaching in the TikTok generation, and proposes a framework that integrates digital literacy, contemplative pedagogy, and the traditional methodology of *uṣūl al-dīn*. The paper proceeds in five movements: a problem statement and research questions; an extended review of literature spanning Aqidah pedagogy, the TikTok phenomenon, and digital-era religious cognition; a theoretical framework drawing on media ecology, cognitive load theory, and constructivist learning; a systematic analysis of eight challenges; and finally, a proposed conceptual framework, methodological pathways for future empirical work, and policy implications.

Problem statement

The pedagogical task of teaching Aqidah has, in every era, required adaptation to the cognitive ecology of the learner. The introduction of printing, mass schooling, and broadcast media each generated distinct pedagogical adjustments within Muslim educational thought (Berkey, 2014; Eickelman, 1992). The current short-form video ecosystem, however, presents a qualitatively different challenge because it does not merely add a new medium to the learner's environment; it reorders the very cognitive and social conditions under which belief is formed, evaluated, and held.

Three interlocking problems demand urgent scholarly attention. First, the attention architecture cultivated by TikTok actively trains against the contemplative cognition that classical Aqidah pedagogy presupposes (Carr, 2020; Newport, 2019). Concepts such as *tawhīd*, divine attributes, and the metaphysics of *qadar* require sustained reflection, yet the median young user encounters thousands of stimuli per day, each demanding less than a minute of attention. Second, the algorithmic logic of TikTok preferentially surfaces content that is emotionally provocative and identity-affirming rather than epistemically reliable (Schellewald, 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). For Muslim youth, this dynamic generates frequent encounters with content advancing deviant creedal positions, sectarian polemics, and pseudo-Sufi or pseudo-Salafi posturing, often presented by aesthetically compelling but scholastically unqualified figures. Third, the platform's parasocial dynamics relocate religious authority from credentialed scholars (*'ulamā'*) to influencers whose authority rests on visibility, charisma, and follower metrics (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014; Slama, 2018; Ahmad, 2023).

Within the Malaysian higher education context, lecturers in Islamic Studies at public universities have begun to report a widening gap between curriculum assumptions designed for textually literate, scholar-deferential learners and the actual cognitive habits of incoming students (Abdullah et al., 2023; Hassan & Ibrahim, 2024). Yet conceptual frameworks to interpret this gap, and to redesign Aqidah pedagogy in response, are underdeveloped. This paper addresses that gap.

Research Objectives

This conceptual paper pursues three interconnected objectives. First, to identify and systematically analyse the principal challenges confronting Aqidah educators in teaching the TikTok generation. Second, to articulate a theoretically grounded conceptual framework synthesising media ecology, cognitive load theory, constructivist learning, and traditional Islamic educational philosophy through which these challenges can be interpreted. Third, to propose pedagogical and curricular implications for Islamic Studies programmes in Malaysian higher education and to outline a methodological pathway for subsequent empirical research.

Research Questions

The paper is organised around three guiding questions. (RQ1) What are the principal challenges that short-form video culture poses for teaching Aqidah to contemporary Muslim youth? (RQ2) How can these challenges be theoretically conceptualised through an integrative framework drawing on both Western media-cognition theory and Islamic educational thought? (RQ3) What pedagogical, curricular, and policy responses are warranted within Malaysian Islamic Studies higher education?

Significance of the study

The significance of this paper is fourfold. Theoretically, it contributes to the small but growing body of scholarship that bridges Islamic educational philosophy with contemporary media-cognition theory, addressing a notable lacuna in both the Islamic Studies and educational technology literatures (Mohamed, 2022; Sahin, 2018). Pedagogically, it furnishes Aqidah teachers, curriculum designers, and Islamic Studies programme leaders with a diagnostic vocabulary for naming the challenges they encounter and a conceptual scaffold for designing responses. Institutionally, it offers Malaysian higher education institutions particularly those running CTU and Pengajian Islam streams such as Universiti Teknologi MARA an evidence-informed basis for curriculum review, lecturer development, and digital-literacy integration. Societally, by contributing to more cognitively realistic and theologically robust Aqidah teaching, the paper supports the broader objective of safeguarding the creedal soundness (*salāmat al-ʿaqīdah*) of Muslim youth in an information environment characterised by epistemic instability.

Literature Review

This literature review surveys four interlocking bodies of scholarship that together inform the present analysis: (i) the conceptual foundations and pedagogical tradition of Aqidah, including its institutionalization within Malaysian higher education; (ii) the technical architecture and cultural logic of TikTok and the broader short-form video ecosystem; (iii) the cognition, identity formation, and religiosity of the digital-native generation; and (iv) the reconfiguration of religious authority under algorithmic conditions. The review concludes by identifying the principal gaps in existing scholarship that the present paper seeks to address. Together, these literatures establish that the challenges of teaching Aqidah today are neither incidental nor merely generational but are rooted in deep, interacting structural transformations of cognition, mediation, and authority.

Aqidah: Conceptual Foundations and Classical Pedagogical Tradition

Etymology and conceptual scope

The term Aqidah derives from the Arabic trilateral root ‘-q-d, signifying that which is firmly knotted, bound, or contracted. In its technical theological usage, Aqidah denotes the body of firmly held creedal commitments that constitute Islamic belief: the oneness of God (tawḥīd), the divine attributes (al-asmā’ wa al-ṣifāt), the angels, the revealed scriptures, the prophets, the Last Day, and divine decree (al-qaḍā’ wa al-qadar) collectively, the arkān al-īmān (Winter, 2008; Al-Attas, 1995). Whereas kalām designates the systematic theological discourse and rational defence of creed, and uṣūl al-dīn refers to the foundational principles of religion as a discipline, Aqidah specifically denotes the propositional and dispositional content of belief itself (Sahin, 2018; Mohamed, 2022). Classical works such as the Maturidi al-‘Aqīda al-Nasafiyya, the Ash'ari Jawhara al-Tawḥīd, and the widely studied al-‘Aqīda al-Ṭaḥāwiyya represent the canonical genres through which Aqidah has been transmitted across generations (Winter, 2008; Berkey, 2014).

The classical Aqidah curriculum

The classical Sunni Aqidah curriculum was structured along two complementary axes: doctrinal-school affiliation (Ash'ari, Maturidi, or Athari) and learner level. Most institutions stratified instruction into three tiers: foundational creed for the general public (‘awāmm), intermediate study with rational argumentation for emerging scholars, and advanced kalām for specialists (khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ) (Berkey, 2014; Winter, 2008). Within Southeast Asia historically, the Ash'ari–Shāfi‘ī synthesis predominated, and texts such as Umm al-Barāhīn of al-Sanūsī and Sifat Dua Puluh treatises shaped the popular Aqidah of generations of Malay Muslims (Mohamed, 2022). This stratification reflected a mature pedagogical insight: creed must be transmitted at a level appropriate to the cognitive and dispositional capacity of the learner, with deeper rational engagement reserved for those whose intellectual training had prepared them for it (Sahin, 2018; Al-Ghazali, 2000).

Pedagogical methods in the classical tradition

The classical method of Aqidah transmission was distinguished by several features those contemporary scholars have identified as pedagogically significant. First, it relied on talaqqī face-to-face oral transmission from a qualified teacher to the student typically validated by an ijāza, or licence to transmit, granted only after demonstrated mastery (Berkey, 2014; Boyle, 2006). Second, it employed a memorisation-then-understanding sequence in which foundational texts were committed to memory in childhood and unpacked through commentary in subsequent years, a method whose cognitive efficacy has recently been re-examined sympathetically by educational researchers (Boyle, 2006). Third, it was embedded in a broader formation of adab the cultivation of right disposition toward knowledge, teacher, and tradition which al-Attas (1980, 1995) places at the conceptual centre of Islamic education through his notion of ta’dīb. Fourth, it operated on extended time scales: full mastery of Aqidah was understood as the work of years, not weeks, and presupposed sustained exposure to a single scholarly community (Sahin, 2018). Each of these features stands in tension with the cognitive habits cultivated by short-form digital media, a tension this paper takes as its central problem.

Aqidah education in the Malaysian higher education context

Malaysian Aqidah education inherits this classical tradition but has been substantially institutionalised within modern higher education. At public universities, Islamic Studies programmes including those offered at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Universiti Malaya (UM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) deliver Aqidah content through structured semester-length courses (Mohamed, 2022; Hassan & Ibrahim, 2024). At UiTM specifically, Aqidah components are integrated into the compulsory CTU (Centre for Islamic Thought and Understanding) curriculum, including CTU101 and CTU152, which all undergraduate students undertake regardless of programme. These courses operate within significant constraints: large class sizes, limited contact hours, heterogeneous student backgrounds, and curricular expectations that

combine creedal content with contemporary applications (Abdullah et al., 2023). Reform debates within Malaysian Islamic Studies have, over the past decade, increasingly addressed how to maintain the depth of classical Aqidah formation within these mass-education conditions a debate now further complicated by the cognitive transformations associated with short-form video (Mustapha & Ismail, 2024; Hassan & Ibrahim, 2024).

TikTok and the Short-Form Video Ecosystem

Origins and technical architecture

TikTok, launched internationally by ByteDance in 2018 (with its Chinese sibling Douyin launched a year earlier), inherits and refines the short-form video format that earlier platforms such as Vine had piloted. Its defining technical innovation is not the short video itself but the For You Page (FYP) an algorithmically curated, infinitely scrolling feed driven by a recommendation system that learns user preferences from micro-behaviours such as completion rate, replays, shares, and dwell time (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The system is sound-first in design: each video is paired with audio that can be reused across other videos, generating cascades of imitative content, or memetic templates, that propagate across the platform (Schellewald, 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Vertical full-screen presentation, rapid switching by swipe, and direct-address aesthetics together produce an immersive experience qualitatively different from feed-based platforms in which users browse a list of items (Abidin, 2021).

Scale, demographics, and intensity of use

By 2023, TikTok reported over one billion monthly active users globally, with adolescents and young adults disproportionately represented; Pew data indicate that approximately two-thirds of US teenagers use the platform, with daily usage common (Anderson & Jiang, 2022). Within Malaysia, ICT and household surveys document near-universal smartphone penetration among university-age cohorts and high engagement with short-form video platforms, including TikTok (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). The intensity of use is also notable: for the median young user, daily exposure runs into hours, structured as repeated micro-sessions throughout the day rather than a few extended sessions. This pattern of distributed micro-exposure has cognitive and habitual implications distinct from those of older media regimes (Carr, 2020; Newport, 2019).

The cultural logic: engagement, affect, and aesthetic

Scholars increasingly characterise TikTok as a distinctive media ecology rather than merely another social network (Abidin, 2021; Schellewald, 2022). Its grammar privileges affect over argument, recognisability over rigour, and personality over institution. Trends, sounds, dance routines, and meme formats provide a shared vocabulary that users iterate upon, generating what Zulli and Zulli (2022) term imitation publics communities constituted not by shared identity but by shared mimetic practices. The platform's economy rewards content optimised for the first three seconds of attention; subtle, complex, or slow-developing material is structurally disadvantaged regardless of its underlying merit (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). For religious educators, this implies that the affordances of the medium are not neutral with respect to theological content: long-form arguments, careful textual exegesis, and qualified, hedged claims are precisely the kinds of communication the platform suppresses.

Religious content on TikTok

Empirical surveys of religious content on TikTok identify several recurrent genres relevant to Aqidah education (Slama, 2018; Husein, 2020; Ahmad, 2023). These include: short fatwa-style videos in which a charismatic figure delivers a ruling on a contemporary issue in under a minute; aestheticised Qur'an recitation videos in which audio is paired with cinematic visuals; lifestyle dakwah content in which Islamic practice is interwoven with everyday vlogging; doctrinal debate clips in which short polemical arguments target competing positions, often without scholarly nuance; and direct critiques of Islamic creed by ex-Muslim or anti-Islamic accounts. For Muslim youth, even those who do not actively seek religious content, algorithmic recommendation routinely surfaces material from these genres (Bunt,

2018; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014). The cumulative result is a creedal information diet shaped by platform incentives rather than by educational design.

The Digital Generation: Cognition, Identity, and Religiosity

Defining the cohort

The students currently entering Malaysian Islamic Studies programmes belong predominantly to Generation Z (born approximately 1997–2012), with Generation Alpha (born 2013 onward) following closely behind (Twenge, 2017; boyd, 2014). Although the digital-native thesis — that this generation possesses innate digital fluency has been substantively critiqued, the cohort is distinctive in that its members have no pre-smartphone, pre-social-media memory; the algorithmic mediation of information has been the default condition of their socialisation (boyd, 2014; Anderson & Jiang, 2022). This is the first generation, in other words, for whom the algorithm has been a constitutive rather than additive feature of cognitive development.

Cognitive effects of habitual short-form consumption

Research on the cognitive effects of habitual digital consumption has progressed from speculative to empirically robust over the past decade. Wolf (2018) marshals neuroscientific evidence that the deep-reading circuit the brain network responsible for analogical reasoning, sustained inference, and reflective synthesis is shaped by sustained text engagement and is comparatively underdeveloped in those whose reading is dominated by short, hyperlink-rich digital material. Carr (2020) integrates this evidence with a broader argument that habitual short-form consumption restructures attentional preferences toward novelty and away from depth. Cognitive load theorists have shown that working-memory capacity, on which complex learning depends, is depleted by environments that elevate extraneous load through frequent stimulus switching (Sweller, 2020; Mayer, 2020). For Aqidah pedagogy, the implication is direct: students whose daily cognitive habits are shaped by hours of TikTok consumption arrive at the classroom with a measurably different cognitive substrate from earlier cohorts a substrate less hospitable to the contemplative engagement that creedal subjects require.

Identity, self-performance, and the algorithmic public

Identity research on this generation consistently emphasises the performative and audience-oriented character of self-construction. Marwick (2015) develops the concept of microcelebrity to describe the self-branding practices through which young people curate identity for an imagined public, while boyd (2014) documents how social media platforms make the ongoing negotiation of identity highly visible and reactive. On TikTok specifically, identity is constructed not only through self-presentation but through participation in trends and the adoption of platform vernaculars (Abidin, 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Crucially for the present paper, religious identity is not exempt from this performative logic: aspects of one's aqidah orientation toward particular schools, attitudes toward controversial issues, displays of piety are increasingly enacted in publicly visible ways that respond to audience feedback (Husein, 2020; Slama, 2018). This stands in sharp tension with the classical pedagogical aim of binding Aqidah firmly into the structure of the soul, where it is supposed to remain stable across audiences and contexts (Sahin, 2018; Al-Attas, 1995).

Religiosity among digital-native Muslim youth

Studies of religiosity among digital-native Muslim youth, particularly in Southeast Asia, document several patterns relevant to Aqidah education. Husein (2020), examining Indonesia, finds that young Muslims increasingly form their religious commitments through engagement with digital preachers rather than through family or formal institutions, a process that produces both new forms of devotion and new forms of doctrinal volatility. Ahmad (2023) reports comparable patterns across Southeast Asia, with TikTok now occupying a particularly central place in this religious-formation pathway. Within Malaysia, available scholarship suggests that university students' first exposure to many creedal questions — including those concerning divine attributes, eschatology, and contested practices — comes through short-form video rather than through family or madrasah instruction (Abdullah et al.,

2023; Hassan & Ibrahim, 2024). This represents a structural inversion of the classical sequence in which family and qualified teachers preceded broader exposure, with implications that Aqidah educators are only beginning to address.

Religious Authority in the Algorithmic Age

Classical conceptions of religious authority in Islam

Classical Sunni Islam developed sophisticated mechanisms for the validation of religious authority, centred on the documented chain of transmission (*isnād*), the licensing of teachers (*ijāza*), and the recognised jurisprudential and creedal schools through which scholarly competence was demonstrated and certified (Berkey, 2014; Winter, 2008). The ‘*ulamā*’ functioned as a distinct social class whose authority derived from a combination of substantive scholarly mastery and procedural recognition by peers and predecessors. This system was self-correcting: an unqualified figure might gain a temporary following, but the institutional structure of the scholarly community provided mechanisms for evaluation, critique, and exclusion (Bunt, 2018; Mohamed, 2022).

Fragmentation of authority in the mass media era

Eickelman's (1992) influential analysis of mass higher education in the modern Arab world identified an early phase of authority fragmentation, in which the spread of literacy and printed religious materials enabled non-traditionally-trained figures to claim religious voice. Subsequent waves of broadcast media, satellite television, and the early internet each extended this fragmentation, producing what Bunt (2018) and Hoover and Echchaibi (2014) describe as a pluralised religious public sphere in which classical credentialing mechanisms compete with alternative authority markers — celebrity, charisma, accessibility, and apparent piety. By the early 2010s, popular online preachers in Indonesia and Malaysia were already drawing audiences exceeding those of credentialed scholars (Slama, 2018; Husein, 2020).

Algorithmic authority: visibility, virality, and parasocial trust

The rise of algorithmic platforms has intensified this fragmentation while transforming its character. Authority on TikTok is conferred not by institutional recognition but by algorithmic visibility the recommendation system surfaces content that maximises engagement, and the figures whose content is repeatedly surfaced acquire, in the eyes of audiences, the appearance of significance and trustworthiness (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). This is compounded by the parasocial intimacy that the platform's direct-to-camera, vertically framed format simulates: viewers feel personally addressed by figures they have never met, generating affective bonds that operate as proxies for trust (Abidin, 2021; Marwick, 2015). For religious content, the result is what Ahmad (2023) and Husein (2020) call an authority crisis in slow motion: classical credentialing has not been formally rejected but has been quietly displaced by alternative markers in the lived experience of audiences.

Empirical studies on celebrity preachers and influencer ‘ulamā’

Empirical scholarship on the celebrity preacher phenomenon in Southeast Asia provides important grounding for the present paper. Husein's (2020) study of Indonesian digital preachers documents the rise of figures who command audiences in the millions, deliver creedal content in highly produced short-form formats, and increasingly bypass traditional institutional review. Slama (2018) shows how this dynamic refracts pre-existing intra-Muslim debates onto digital platforms, producing intensified polemics whose participants include figures with limited formal training. Ahmad (2023) extends the analysis to Malaysia and the broader Southeast Asian region, documenting a particularly steep growth curve for TikTok-based religious figures since 2020. Together, these studies establish that the algorithmic reconfiguration of religious authority is not a speculative future development but a present empirical reality with measurable effects on the religious formation of young Muslims.

Synthesis and Identified Gaps

The four bodies of literature reviewed above converge on a coherent diagnosis. Aqidah, as both a body of doctrine and a pedagogical tradition, presupposes a particular cognitive substrate (sustained, contemplative, textually engaged), a particular social structure of authority (credentialed scholars within recognised schools), and a particular formative timescale (years of guided study). Each of these presuppositions is being eroded by the algorithmic media ecology in which the current generation is being socialised. Short-form video conditions cognitive habits inhospitable to deep reading; algorithmic recommendation surfaces credally heterogeneous content of variable reliability; visibility and parasocial intimacy displace classical credentialing; and identity itself is constructed in ways more responsive to audience than to internalised doctrine.

Yet despite this convergence, the existing literature exhibits several gaps that the present paper seeks to address. First, scholarship on Islamic education and scholarship on digital media tend to be conducted in separate intellectual communities with limited cross-citation, leaving the integrative theoretical work largely undone (Mohamed, 2022; Sahin, 2018). Second, what cross-disciplinary work exists has focused primarily on dakwah and general religious literacy rather than on Aqidah specifically a discipline whose cognitive demands and authority-structure assumptions are particularly stringent and therefore particularly disrupted (Bunt, 2018; Husein, 2020). Third, conceptual frameworks that name the specific challenges Aqidah educators face, in terms detailed enough to guide curricular and pedagogical response, remain underdeveloped, especially within the Malaysian higher education context (Hassan & Ibrahim, 2024; Mustapha & Ismail, 2024). The present paper addresses these three gaps by offering an integrative theoretical framework, an Aqidah-specific challenge analysis, and pedagogical implications grounded in the Malaysian higher education setting.

Theoretical framework

This paper draws upon three complementary theoretical lenses, integrated with classical Islamic educational philosophy, to interpret the challenges of teaching Aqidah in the TikTok generation.

Media Ecology Theory

Media ecology, developed by McLuhan (1964) and elaborated by Postman (1985, 1992), holds that communication media are not neutral conduits but environments that shape the cognition and culture of those who inhabit them. Postman's central thesis that the medium dictates the kinds of thought a culture can sustain provides a powerful lens for understanding why short-form video does not merely deliver Aqidah-related content differently but transforms how creedal questions can be posed and answered. Where the medium of the book sustains the long argument and the careful distinction central to kalām, the medium of the thirty-second video sustains the slogan and the affective gesture.

Cognitive Load Theory

Sweller's (1988, 2020) cognitive load theory distinguishes intrinsic, extraneous, and germane cognitive load and demonstrates that learning is impaired when working-memory capacity is exceeded. Aqidah concepts carry high intrinsic cognitive load: *tawhīd al-asmā' wa al-ṣifāt*, for instance, requires the learner to hold simultaneously multiple distinctions about divine attributes. Habitual exposure to high-stimulation, low-coherence short-form content elevates extraneous load and depletes the cognitive resources available for the germane processing through which deep schemas of Aqidah are constructed (Sweller, 2020; Mayer, 2020).

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist accounts (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996) emphasise that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with more capable others within zones of proximal development. The traditional Aqidah classroom, with its qualified teacher and scaffolded textual study, exemplifies this principle. Algorithmic content streams, by contrast, operate without scaffolding and

without the dialogic presence of a more capable other; learners construct creedal frames in interaction with a recommender system rather than a teacher.

Classical Islamic Educational Philosophy

Al-Attas's (1980, 1995) concept of *ta'dīb* the inculcation of right disposition toward knowledge and al-Ghazālī's (2000) emphasis on the moral and contemplative formation of the learner together provide an Islamic theoretical anchor. Both insist that the formation of *Aqidah* is not merely informational but *adabī*: it requires a particular ordering of the soul, cultivated by sustained contact with a qualified teacher and disciplined practice. The TikTok ecology, on this reading, is not just a different medium but a different formation of *adab* and one structurally at odds with the formation *Aqidah* education seeks to cultivate (Sahin, 2018; Mohamed, 2022).

Eight challenges of teaching *aqidah* in the tiktok generation

Synthesising the literature and the theoretical framework, this paper identifies eight interrelated challenges. They are presented separately for analytical clarity but, in the lived classroom, they overlap and amplify one another.

Attention Fragmentation and the Erosion of Contemplative Cognition

The first and most foundational challenge is the systematic training of student attention away from sustained reflection. Short-form video rewards rapid switching and punishes any content that fails to capture interest within the first seconds. Over years of daily exposure, these conditions a cognitive habitus in which extended textual engagement feels effortful and aversive (Carr, 2020; Wolf, 2018). Yet *Aqidah* pedagogy at university level presupposes precisely such extended engagement — with creedal manuals, with Qur'anic verses on *tawhīd*, and with structured *kalām* arguments. Lecturers report that students struggle to remain with a single argument long enough to grasp it (Abdullah et al., 2023). The challenge is not motivational but neurocognitive: the deep-reading circuit on which *Aqidah* learning relies is under-developed in habitual short-form users.

Algorithmic Exposure to Deviant and Pseudo-Religious Content

Algorithmic recommendation does not optimise for theological soundness; it optimises for engagement. As a result, content advancing positions deviant from mainstream Sunni *Aqidah* including extreme literalism, anti-*madhhab* polemics, esoteric fringe claims, and openly heterodox creeds circulates widely on TikTok, often with high production polish (Bunt, 2018; Husein, 2020; Ahmad, 2023). Students arrive in the *Aqidah* classroom not as blank slates but with prior exposure to such content. The lecturer's task is no longer merely to introduce creed but to disentangle it from a sediment of partially understood algorithmic theology.

Crisis of Religious Authority

The third challenge concerns who counts as an authority. Classical *Aqidah* pedagogy depends on the recognised authority of the qualified teacher and, behind the teacher, the documented chain of transmission. In the TikTok ecology, authority is measured in followers and views (Slama, 2018; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014). Students may treat a viral influencer's casual religious opinion as carrying weight comparable to, or greater than, that of their lecturer. The pedagogical asymmetry that traditional Islamic learning presupposes *adab* between student and teacher is undermined before instruction begins.

Parasocial Bonds with Religious Influencers

Parasocial relationships, in which audience members feel intimately connected to media figures they have never met, are intensified on platforms such as TikTok, where direct address to camera and intimate visual framing simulate face-to-face interaction (Abidin, 2021). When the figure is a religious influencer, the resulting bond can rival or exceed the affective bond with a real-world teacher, even when the influencer lacks scholarly credentials (Husein, 2020). For *Aqidah* educators, this generates an

emotional incumbency advantage for content already consumed students may be reluctant to revise positions they associate with a beloved online figure.

Echo Chambers and the Narrowing of Theological Imagination

Algorithmic personalisation, while not producing absolute filter bubbles, does narrow the range of theological positions a user routinely encounters (Pariser, 2011; Cinelli et al., 2021). A student whose For You Page is dominated by a particular sub-tradition arrives at the Aqidah classroom believing, often unconsciously, that this sub-tradition simply is Islam. Exposing them to the breadth of legitimate Sunni positions on, for instance, the divine attributes can feel destabilising rather than enriching, because the algorithmic experience has already conferred a sense of completeness.

Identity Instability and the Performative Self

Adolescent identity formation has always been turbulent, but TikTok intensifies its performative dimensions: identity is constructed for and tested by the gaze of an imagined audience (boyd, 2014; Marwick, 2015). Religious identity, including aqidah commitments, becomes part of this performance adopted, abandoned, or hybridised in response to audience response. This conflicts with the classical pedagogical aim of binding aqidah firmly into the structure of the soul (ta'dīb), producing students whose creedal positions are responsive to peer affirmation rather than rooted in conviction (Sahin, 2018; Mohamed, 2022).

Visual-Experiential Epistemology versus Rational-Textual Proof

Traditional Aqidah, particularly within the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools, is structured around the integration of rational proof (dalīl 'aqlī) and textual proof (dalīl naqlī). Students must learn to argue from premise to conclusion and to weigh textual evidence by established hermeneutical rules. Short-form video, however, cultivates an epistemology in which the visually compelling and the affectively moving function as warrants for belief. A student trained by years of TikTok consumption may find an emotionally arresting one-minute clip more persuasive than a careful chapter of kalām reasoning, regardless of the relative epistemic merit (Postman, 1985; Schellewald, 2022).

Crisis of Teacher Authority and Classroom Engagement

Finally, the cumulative effect of the preceding seven challenges is a classroom in which the lecturer's authority pedagogical, moral, and scholarly must be earned anew rather than presupposed. The traditional adab of the student toward the teacher cannot be assumed where the same student has already, through hours of daily consumption, developed parasocial bonds with figures perceived as more accessible, more entertaining, and more relatable than the lecturer (Bunt, 2018; Hassan & Ibrahim, 2024). The lecturer is not merely teaching Aqidah; the lecturer is competing, on unequal terms, for the cognitive and affective primacy that classical pedagogy assumed.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In response to the foregoing analysis, this paper proposes an integrative conceptual framework for Aqidah pedagogy in the algorithmic age. The framework, provisionally termed the Tripartite Framework for Algorithmic-Era Aqidah Pedagogy (TFAA), comprises three mutually reinforcing components.

Critical Digital Literacy for Religious Content

The first component equips students to evaluate religious content encountered on algorithmic platforms. Drawing on existing media-literacy traditions (Buckingham, 2019; Hobbs, 2020) but adapted to Islamic creedal evaluation, this component teaches students to identify scholarly credentials, recognise algorithmic incentives, distinguish authoritative from non-authoritative voices within Islamic tradition, and apply classical principles such as isnād and matn evaluation to digital sources. It is preventive in orientation, intervening upstream of doctrinal commitment.

Contemplative Pedagogy and Cognitive Re-conditioning

The second component deliberately rebuilds the cognitive substrate that Aqidah requires. This entails structured practices of slow reading, sustained reflection (tafakkur), and contemplative engagement with primary texts (Sahin, 2018; Wolf, 2018). Specific instructional techniques include extended close reading of short Aqidah passages, journaling of theological reflection, and disciplined classroom periods of disconnected attention. These are not nostalgic gestures but evidence-informed responses to the documented neurocognitive effects of habitual short-form consumption.

Re-anchored Scholarly Authority through Relational Pedagogy

The third component addresses the authority crisis by re-anchoring scholarly authority through deepened teacher–student relationship. Where parasocial bonds with influencers thrive on apparent intimacy, the classroom can offer real intimacy: mentorship, consistent presence, intellectual hospitality, and the lived modelling of *adab al-‘ālim wa al-muta‘allim* (al-Ghazālī, 2000; Mohamed, 2022). The lecturer is repositioned not as a competitor with the algorithm but as offering something the algorithm structurally cannot sustained, accountable, and personally formative scholarly relationship.

These three components are conceived as interlocking rather than sequential. Critical digital literacy without contemplative re-conditioning leaves students cognitively unable to internalise what they critically evaluate. Contemplative practice without scholarly relationship lacks transmission; relational pedagogy without digital literacy leaves students vulnerable each time they exit the classroom. Together, the three offer a coherent response to the eight challenges identified in section seven.

Methodological implications for future research

As a conceptual paper, this work invites empirical investigation along several lines. A mixed-methods design is recommended. Quantitative survey instruments could measure Malaysian Islamic Studies students' patterns of TikTok consumption, exposure to creedal content, and self-reported attentional difficulties, correlated with measures of Aqidah comprehension (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative phenomenological interviews with lecturers and students could illuminate the lived experience of the eight challenges within specific course contexts (Mustapha & Ismail, 2024). Design-based research could pilot interventions corresponding to each component of the proposed framework — critical-digital-literacy modules, contemplative-pedagogy units, and relational-mentorship structures — and measure their effects on Aqidah comprehension, retention, and dispositional outcomes (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Bibliometric analysis of the emerging literature on Islamic education and short-form video would map the scholarly conversation and identify under-researched questions.

Pedagogical, curricular, and policy implications

For lecturers, the analysis suggests that Aqidah teaching in the present generation cannot be reduced to delivering content; it must include the deliberate formation of the cognitive and dispositional capacities that creed presupposes. For curriculum designers, courses such as CTU101 and CTU152 may benefit from revised learning outcomes that explicitly address digital theological literacy and contemplative practice alongside doctrinal content. For Islamic Studies faculties at institutions such as Universiti Teknologi MARA, lecturer professional development should equip educators not only with theological expertise but with literacy in the platform logics shaping their students. For policy-makers including the Ministry of Higher Education and JAKIM the framework suggests value in coordinated guidelines for algorithmic-era religious education and in the production of high-quality, authoritative Islamic content adapted to short-form platforms without surrendering scholarly integrity.

Conclusion

Teaching Aqidah has never been merely a matter of conveying doctrine; it has always required forming the kind of person to whom doctrine can be properly transmitted. The TikTok generation is not

less capable than its predecessors but is differently formed by a media ecology that systematically privileges fragmented attention, algorithmic authority, parasocial intimacy, and visual-experiential epistemology over the contemplative cognition, scholarly authority, real relationship, and rational-textual proof on which classical Aqidah pedagogy depends. The eight challenges analysed in this paper articulate, in granular terms, the resulting pedagogical task. The proposed Tripartite Framework integrating critical digital literacy, contemplative pedagogy, and re-anchored relational authority — offers a coherent response grounded in both contemporary educational theory and classical Islamic educational philosophy. Empirical investigation is now required to test, refine, and extend this framework. The stakes are not merely curricular: at issue is the *salāmat al-‘aqīdah* of a generation whose cognitive and social formation has been, in significant measure, outsourced to recommender systems. The Aqidah classroom, properly reconceived, can be one of the few institutional spaces in which that formation is consciously reclaimed.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who contributed directly and indirectly to this study.

References

- Abidin, C. (2021). From "networked publics" to "refracted publics": A companion framework for researching "below the radar" studies. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1), 1–13.
- Ahmad, F. (2023). Influencer ulama and the reconfiguration of religious authority on TikTok in Southeast Asia. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 33(4), 312–330.
- Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1980). *The concept of education in Islam: A framework for an Islamic philosophy of education*. International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).
- Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1995). *Prolegomena to the metaphysics of Islam: An exposition of the fundamental elements of the worldview of Islam*. International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).
- Al-Ghazali, A. H. (2000). *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* [The revival of the religious sciences] (M. M. al-Sharif, Ed.). Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah. (Original work published ca. 1100 CE)
- Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2022). *Teens, social media and technology 2022*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>
- Anderson, T., & Shattuck, J. (2012). Design-based research: A decade of progress in education research? *Educational Researcher*, 41(1), 16–25.
- Berkey, J. P. (2014). *The transmission of knowledge in medieval Cairo: A social history of Islamic education*. Princeton University Press.
- Bhandari, A., & Bimo, S. (2022). Why's everyone on TikTok now? The algorithmized self and the future of self-constitution on social media. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1), 1–11.
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.
- Boyle, H. N. (2006). Memorization and learning in Islamic schools. *Comparative Education Review*, 50(3), 478–495.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Harvard University Press.
- Buckingham, D. (2019). *The media education manifesto*. Polity Press.
- Bunt, G. R. (2018). *Hashtag Islam: How cyber-Islamic environments are transforming religious authority*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Carr, N. (2020). *The shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains* (Updated ed.). W. W. Norton.

- Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociochi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(9), e2023301118.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2023). *ICT use and access by individuals and households survey report, Malaysia, 2023*. DOSM.
- Eickelman, D. F. (1992). Mass higher education and the religious imagination in contemporary Arab societies. *American Ethnologist*, 19(4), 643–655.
- Halstead, J. M. (2004). An Islamic concept of education. *Comparative Education*, 40(4), 517–529.
- Hassan, N., & Ibrahim, M. (2024). Reimagining Aqidah pedagogy in the digital era: A qualitative inquiry among Malaysian Islamic Studies lecturers. *Journal of Contemporary Islamic Studies*, 10(1), 55–78.
- Hobbs, R. (2020). *Mind over media: Propaganda education for a digital age*. W. W. Norton.
- Hoover, S. M., & Echchaibi, N. (Eds.). (2014). *Media, religion and the marketplace in the digital age*. Bloomsbury.
- Husein, F. (2020). The new generation of Indonesian Muslim preachers: 'Ulamā' in the digital era. *Studia Islamika*, 27(2), 233–262.
- Marwick, A. E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27(1), 137–160.
- Mayer, R. E. (2020). *Multimedia learning* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. McGraw-Hill.
- Mohamed, Y. (2022). Reclaiming the moral imagination: Adab and Islamic education in the modern university. *Islamic Studies Review*, 14(2), 99–122.
- Mustapha, R., & Ismail, S. (2024). Lecturer experiences of teaching Islamic creed to short-form video native students: A phenomenological study. *Malaysian Journal of Islamic Education*, 9(1), 23–44.
- Newport, C. (2019). *Digital minimalism: Choosing a focused life in a noisy world*. Portfolio.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Viking.
- Postman, N. (1992). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*. Knopf.
- Sahin, A. (2018). Critical issues in Islamic education studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western liberal secular values of education. *Religions*, 9(11), 335.
- Schellewald, A. (2022). Communicative forms on TikTok: Perspectives from digital ethnography. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 1437–1457.
- Slama, M. (2018). Practising Islam through social media in Indonesia. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 46(134), 1–4.
- Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science*, 12(2), 257–285.
- Sweller, J. (2020). Cognitive load theory and educational technology. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 68(1), 1–16.
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy — and completely unprepared for adulthood*. Atria Books.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Winter, T. (Ed.). (2008). *The Cambridge companion to classical Islamic theology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wolf, M. (2018). *Reader, come home: The reading brain in a digital world*. Harper.
- Zeng, J., & Kaye, D. B. V. (2022). From content moderation to visibility moderation: A case study of platform governance on TikTok. *Policy & Internet*, 14(1), 79–95.
- Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2022). Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. *New Media & Society*, 24(8), 1872–1890.

Publisher: CLM Publishing Resources Malaysia



Open Access: This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third-party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the manuscript and its [Supporting Information](#) files.